



ALEXANDER GALLOWAY 2019-12-02

## FEMALES

BIOPOLITICS FEMALES, FEMINISM, NEGATIVE, STRUCTURALISM, UNIVERSAL

Cue the TERF wars. The coming responses to Andrea Long Chu's book *Females* — there will be many so get ready — are so predictable they practically write themselves. Some will most certainly object to Chu defining female via the negative, any negative. And anyway, they will claim, only an author who is “really” a man could be this misogynistic. Others will object to Chu's affection for words like “all” and “universal”; we just don't describe people that way anymore. Such objections will subsequently morph into the classic Animal Farm rebuttal: yes, okay, but some females are more female than other females. I don't subscribe to any of this.

Why is this book so interesting? A compulsively readable pamphlet, the book is funny and gutsy, weird and perverted in all the best ways. But more important is how Chu defines female as a structural condition determined by the symbolic order, not some empirical fact about sex or gender, and certainly not via the typical liberal discourse around women's empowerment. In other words, *Females* is important because it is *structuralist*. That's also why people will hate it.

The book loosely follows the work of Valerie Solanas, specifically a play that she wrote called *Up your Ass*, as well as her incendiary tract on sex and capitalism, the *SCUM Manifesto*, a perennial art school favorite. References to and quotations from Solanas dot the book throughout, and Chu engages with Warhol and the larger avant-garde tradition. (Indeed the pamphlet frequently reminded me of all those Semiotexte small-format theory paperbacks by Hakim Bey, Critical Art Ensemble, etc., similar in spirit but also in form.) Moonlighting as a film critic, Chu also offers short but illuminating sections on *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, and *Don Jon* — needle scratch, yes that terrible Joseph Gordon-Levitt vehicle — all interwoven with engaging commentary on art and pornography, with the ultimate confession that “sissy porn did make me trans” (79).

I see *Females* as part of a growing collection of texts and theoretical interventions that focus on structural analyses, on the symbolic order and its libidinal economy, and which therefore implicitly oppose themselves to the empirico-realist consensus of the early 2000s. I won't claim a full-fledged structuralist renaissance, at least not yet. Still, across texts as divergent as Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason*, Wilderson's *Red, White & Black*, and others, there is a sense that society and culture are best defined in terms of structural conditions, deeper structural antagonisms, rather than the seeming neutrality of manifest observation. According to Mbembe, the world is becoming black, the whole world, mind you, not

just part of it. Or, here, in Chu's assessment, "literally everyone, every single human being in the history of the planet" is female (12).

Still, Chu has not attempted to write a Big Theory Book or to situate transness within the larger socio-historical context of capitalism and pharmacology. In a sense *Females* is the antipode of Paul Preciado's book *Testo Junkie*, which has been criticized, I think rightly, for glamorizing male transgression and treating hormones as a kind of Schedule-One narcotic. Nothing like that in this book, as Chu unspools the stages of her transition casually: I used to be a boy, she says, then it was testosterone blockers, followed by estrogen twice daily, and finally she "purchased a new vagina" (88). If you're looking for drama, you won't find it here. At the same time, Chu has been forthcoming about what she calls "the negative passions—grief, self-loathing, shame, regret," opting to bring the darkness closer rather than cast it away.

The book is organized around a series of theses: (1) female means self-negation; (2) everyone is female; (3) everyone hates it.

"Femaleness is a universal sex," claims Chu, a universal sex "defined by self-negation" (11). Or, as she put it tartly in a recent interview, "I am on Team Castration—literally." More specifically, "female" for Chu means "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another...To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense" (11). Chu connects this interestingly to the question of narcissism, only now it's "someone *else's* narcissism" (35), a form of desire not originating from the self but diverted through the desires of another.

Chu follows the logic all the way to the end — and here's where I imagine she begins to loose some of her more skeptical readers — since this sort of radical devaluation of the self leads, eventually, to those exaggerated forms of evacuated femininity like the dumb blonde (30), the bimbo (78), or the female as object (37). In fact, these are all good subject positions, according to Chu, or if not good than at least honest and real, and she likewise embraces the old trope of female-as-artifice (think of Pygmalion, female robots, etc.), reinvented now around the figure of the drag queen. We're all drag queens, in other words (33), and, if so, trans isn't a fringe exception, it's "the rule governing *all* gender" (34).

The remaining theses, that everyone is female and that everyone hates it, are distributed throughout the text, across a variety of examples. Chu describes the way in which macho masculine assertiveness is a plea for submission, how even red-pilled pick up artists are, in effect, feminizing themselves through repeated acts of subjection if not humiliation. (Remember, Chu's is not an empirical claim about sex or gender; it's a structural claim about the symbolic order.) Likewise pornography is an inherently feminizing form, or at least it turns everyone into females, contrary to the notion that porn enacts a dominant male gaze. "You think you have an object," Chu states flatly about porn, "but really the object has you" (63). And this experience is not bound in time and space, but rather an ambient, general condition of all subjectivity. "Most desire is nonconsensual," she observes (79), neatly destabilizing decades of Deleuzian bromides about the affirmative potential of "desiring agents" and the Spinozian "conatus."

Here I was reminded of the structural passivity of visibility more generally. "The visual is *essentially* pornographic," Jameson wrote in his opening to *Signatures of the Visible*, "which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination... Pornographic films are thus only the potential of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body." What if this "rapt, mindless fascination" is really just shorthand for subjectivity more generally? What if, like Iris, we are all *Thaumantian*, the Daughters of Wonder?

Pay attention to Chu's use of modifiers like "all," "universal," and "every." Such words have been nearly struck from proper English usage, on the grounds that they elide difference and hence are politically retrograde. Female is "a universal existential condition," Chu asserts, "the one and only structure of human consciousness" (12). The one and only? This will piss off a lot of people. Such are the dangers of structuralism. (And, again, the TERFs will use this as a way to argue that ALC is not really female, because structuralism is for dudes, apparently.)

But luckily there's a fourth thesis as well, a final thesis that mollifies the admittedly very real dangers that surround any universal claim. Chu doesn't state the fourth thesis explicitly, but furnishes enough material for us to fill it in ourselves: (4) the universal female means we all inhabit an ethical community. If femaleness means a kind of mutual entanglement of desire, and if femaleness is universal, then everyone's desire is perpetually interwoven with other people. Your desire is not your own. Your desire always mirrors through another's. And while such a configuration might generate pathologized subject positions (female as negation), it also generates — if you'll pardon the grandiosity — a kind of universal ethical fabric. Negation here is a feature not a bug. Chu's structuralist universal is thus a "universal from below," since it generalizes from the subordinate position. (Theorists like Badiou and Laruelle refer to this not as "gender" but as "generic.")

And ethical really does mean ethical; the political is something else entirely. I'm not sure this is a political book, in fact, despite all of the hot button issues it addresses. For instance, Chu overlooks the Marxist side of the *SCUM Manifesto*, a text about money and labor in addition to sex. Ultimately it struck me that *Females* is a bit like Tiqqun's book on the "young-girl," only with Freud swapped in for Marx. (That Tiqqun book was widely condemned after it appeared in English, particularly after poet Ariana Reines disavowed the text, describing how the task of translating it had made her physically sick.) What to make, then, of Chu's claim that "the political is the sworn enemy of the female," that "politics is, in its essence, anti-female" (13)? These strange, seemingly offhand remarks are nevertheless canny, for they reveal, I suspect, a truth less about the female than the nature of the political. Chu's point is that politics is anti-unitary or anti-universal, and so if "female" is a universal category, then politics is, perforce, anti-female.

This is one way in which structures are dialectical: they are inherently structures of antagonism and hence inherently political; yet the very universality of the structure obviates political realities in favor of an ambient ethical condition. The claim “everyone is female” is thus more an ethical claim than a political one

This generates a final consequence, as unexpected as it is necessary, that the political project of feminism is “impossible.” Which doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it.

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